

CONCORD MONITOR (NH)
17 April 1980

The CIA-journalism li

If you were reading a news story by a foreign correspondent for an American newspaper, and you found out he was working on the side for the Central Intelligence Agency, would you lose confidence in the integrity of his reporting?

That was an issue that erupted unexpectedly last week when CIA director Stansfield Turner addressed a session of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington.

The CIA changed its regulations in 1977 to prohibit the use of American journalists for secret intelligence operations. But Adm. Turner disclosed last week there are exceptions to that rule. He said that on three occasions he personally had approved the use of journalists as CIA agents.

Turner said none had carried out intelligence assignments because circumstances had changed by the time those assignments were to have been carried out. He wouldn't say what the assignments were, or who was involved, but it was the first time it became known there was a loophole in the CIA regulations.

A. M. Rosenthal, executive editor of the New York Times, led the editors' assault on the practice of using American correspondents as agents of the CIA.

"You have put into question the real purpose of American foreign correspondence," Rosenthal told Turner. "And you have cast doubt on the ethical position of every American correspondent abroad."

Turner was aghast. He told Rosenthal he thought editors who believed that were "naive." And he said, "I don't understand why you think if you accepted an assignment from me that you are no longer free."

Clearly what concerned the editors was that a correspondent who worked for the CIA on the side might warp or withhold news of major developments to accommodate his CIA employers, undercutting

the responsibility of his newspaper employers.

Also, if it became known that a correspondent was cooperating with the CIA, it would cast distrust and suspicion on all American correspondents working abroad, shutting off their sources of information and hampering their ability to report fully and objectively.

The losers in this situation would be the readers of their newspapers who would be deprived of all the available ingredients for reaching a full understanding of complicated international events.

There is yet another consideration. By becoming a handmaiden to the government, a correspondent opens the possibility that the government will pressure him to report falsely or withhold news on the threat of disclosure of previous cooperation.

While these reasons may seem compelling, it still is a dilemma for an American news reporter working abroad who is motivated to help his government without compromising his own integrity.

There is no instant answer. An American correspondent who moves about freely in a foreign nation often is in a position to acquire information unavailable to the CIA.

Should he share that information with his government? Not for pay, we believe. But if it is a piece of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle that would affect the nation's security, or become an ingredient of a top-level decision, we believe it must be shared, even at the expense of the reporter's job.

It also should be shared with the correspondent's editors, most of whom have easy access to the top echelons of government under such circumstances.

An arm's length relationship between the press and the government is a crucial component of our system. But it should not be so blind that the nation is adversely affected by it.